UNITED NATIONS

General Assembly

FIFTY-FIRST SESSION

Official Records

THIRD COMMITTEE
22nd meeting
held on
Friday, 1 November 1996
at 3 p.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 22ND MEETING

Chairman: Mrs. ESPINOSA (Mexico)

CONTENTS

AGENDA ITEM 105: REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES, QUESTIONS RELATING TO REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS AND HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS (continued)

This record is subject to correction. Corrections should be sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned *within one week of the date of the publication* to the Chief of the Official Records Editing Section, room DC2-794, 2 United Nations Plaza, and incorporated in a copy of the record.

Corrections will be issued after the end of the session, in a separate corrigendum for each Committee.

Distr. GENERAL
A/C.3/51/SR.22
19 September 1997
ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: SPANISH

96-81797 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 105: REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES, QUESTIONS RELATING TO REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS AND HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS (continued) (A/51/12 and Add.1, A/51/329, A/51/341, A/51/367, A/51/454 and A/51/206-S/1996/539)

1. Mr. MERDAD (Saudi Arabia) said that ethnic and national conflicts which had led to violence, terrorism and destruction in many parts of the world were the main cause of the tragic problem of refugees and displaced persons. His Government condemned all forms of ethnic violence and called upon all States to oppose it. His country was guided by Arab and Islamic principles, the human rights principles embodied in international and regional organizations, and international rules and conventions.

2. The responsibility for preventing involuntary displacement fell to the international community, which must also provide humanitarian and financial assistance to the affected countries, bearing in mind that such measures should be part of a comprehensive strategy to promote peace, security and economic and social development in the countries concerned.

3. He expressed appreciation for the role of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and especially for the High Commissioner's efforts to ensure international protection for refugees. Nevertheless, in order for UNHCR to carry out its humanitarian programmes, the international community must provide it with sufficient resources. The partnership between UNHCR and other international humanitarian organizations should be expanded in order to achieve better coordination between relief and development activities.

4. He noted with sorrow the sufferings of refugees throughout the world, especially Palestinian refugees. Those refugees had been displaced illegally, were still being detained arbitrarily, and lived in conditions harmful to their physical and psychological well-being. While Israel was settling thousands of Jewish immigrants in Palestine, it refused to implement the international resolutions calling for the Palestinians' return to their homeland. Israel had refused to deal with that issue from a political perspective and had focused solely on the humanitarian aspects, which would prolong the suffering of the Palestinian refugees. He therefore called upon Member States to exert pressure on Israel to guarantee the inalienable rights of the Palestinian refugees. He also requested Member States to support the humanitarian activities which the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was carrying out on behalf of Palestinian refugees, to which his Government contributed $1.2 million per year.

5. His Government had allowed UNHCR to oversee the status of refugees in Saudi Arabia and had granted diplomatic status to its representatives so that they could perform their duties properly. His Government also cooperated with UNHCR in finding adequate solutions to the problems of refugees within its borders. Saudi Arabia was the only country which bore all the expenses of those refugees without help from other countries or international organizations. In addition to defraying the living expenses of the refugees, it provided them with

excellent services in the camps and fully respected their human rights, as recognized by the UNHCR office in Riyadh. Lastly, he appealed to the international community to do its utmost to alleviate the sufferings of the refugees, urged the host countries to facilitate the safe return of the refugees and their reintegration into their societies, and called upon international organizations to heighten their effectiveness and improve the coordination of international assistance.

6. Mr. MEHMOUD (Sudan) said that his country had been one of the first African States to sign the international conventions and treaties relating to refugees and to promulgate legislation to protect such persons. His Government reaffirmed its commitment to the implementation of those instruments, noting that the granting of asylum was a humanitarian act. The international community should seek to alleviate the burden of the host countries, adopt measures to enable the refugees to become self-sufficient, and find lasting solutions, such as return, voluntary repatriation and social reintegration.

7. His country had received refugee flows for many years. At one time, it had received over 1 million refugees, and was now protecting over 600,000. While the Sudan had sought to provide decent conditions for the refugees, it believed that voluntary repatriation was the best way to solve the refugee problem. Accordingly, it had signed tripartite agreements with UNHCR and neighbouring countries, such as Chad and Ethiopia, which had led to the voluntary repatriation of many refugees. In addition, his Government has signed a bilateral agreement with UNHCR to initiate the repatriation of 500,000 Eritrean refugees in the Sudan.

8. Moreover, his Government was concerned about its citizens who had fled to Kenya, Uganda, Zaire, the Central African Republic and Ethiopia. The exodus of those persons was due to the war that had been forced on the Sudan for over 13 years. The Sudanese refugees suffered from the lack of food and medicines, the forced recruitment of teenagers into the rebel army, and attacks by rebel forces against refugee camps. Many Sudanese women, children and elderly people had perished because neither the host countries nor the international community had protected them. Accordingly, his Government requested the international community to comply with its obligations towards the Sudanese refugees. For its part, his Government had sought to eliminate the causes of the exodus of its citizens and had reaffirmed its support for the voluntary repatriation programmes of UNHCR.

9. He stressed furthermore that the assistance provided to his country was not commensurate with the large number of refugees which it had to protect, as recognized by the mission which had visited the Sudan in 1994. He therefore called upon the international community to increase its assistance to refugees in the Sudan.

10. Ms. WANG Yuehua (China) said that if the serious global problem of refugees was to be solved, its root causes must be eliminated and international protection and humanitarian assistance must be provided to the refugees. In order to eliminate the causes of the refugee problem, it was necessary to establish a new international political and economic order based on increased international cooperation to promote progress and development in the developing countries, the peaceful settlement of disputes, respect for State sovereignty

and non-interference in the internal affairs of States. While all States shared responsibility for solving the refugee problem, the majority of States which currently received refugees and displaced persons were developing countries, which had great difficulties in ensuring decent conditions for such persons. Accordingly, the international community should provide more assistance to those countries and should promote the voluntary repatriation, social reintegration and resettlement of refugees. UNHCR should formulate and implement policies that took into account the causes of the exodus of refugees and displaced persons and the economic, social, political and environmental conditions of the countries concerned.

11. Her delegation welcomed the ideas and solutions put forward by the Governments which had participated in the forty-seventh session of the UNHCR Executive Committee, together with the new methods of work established for the Committee, which would enable UNHCR to continue its efforts to assist refugees more efficiently, avoid duplication and make more effective use of its resources.

12. The UNHCR Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese Refugees and the repatriation to Cambodia, which had set an example for solutions to refugee problems, had been completed in June. Nevertheless, she appealed to all the parties concerned to continue to pay attention to the problem of Vietnamese refugees who remained in Hong Kong. Her Government had made tremendous efforts to receive and protect 280,000 Indochinese refugees and, with the support of UNHCR and the international community, had cooperated with the Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in the voluntary repatriation of over 3,000 Lao refugees in China. Her country would continue to assist those refugees who wished to return to their homeland in safety and dignity and to support the work of UNHCR.

13. Mr. ARDA (Turkey) said that, in order to carry out its mission of providing aid to 26 million people, UNHCR needed the support of the Member States more than ever. Turkey, which was a member of the UNHCR Executive Committee, had contributed to the search for durable solutions to the refugee problem. Because of its geographic location and tradition of providing asylum, it had received many refugees and, despite the considerable economic and social burdens it had had to face in consequence, had created a safe haven for those people. Thanks to the cooperation between the Turkish Government and UNHCR, almost half a million people who had taken refuge in Turkey since 1991 had been voluntarily repatriated.

14. Voluntary repatriation continued to be the preferred solution to the refugee problem. In that respect, bilateral contacts between the country of origin and the host country must be encouraged in order to provide a suitable atmosphere for refugees to return to their homes in security and dignity. However, the third country resettlement option should also be kept open.

15. Turkey believed that all measures taken to alleviate the suffering of the population afflicted by the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina should be based on the March 1996 UNHCR repatriation plan. Turkey commended UNHCR for the work it had accomplished since the Dayton Agreements and called on the parties to the conflict to refrain from actions that could delay repatriation and reconciliation.

16. Turkey accorded the utmost importance to peace and stability in the Caucasus region, where involuntary population movements had occurred. In that respect, his delegation took note of the Secretary-General's report on the Regional Conference to Address the Problems of Refugees, Displaced Persons, Other Forms of Involuntary Displacement and Returnees in the Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and Relevant Neighbouring States (A/51/341).

17. Turkey welcomed the efforts of UNHCR to enhance the protection of minors, women and other vulnerable groups in the refugee population, as well as the efforts of the High Commissioner to create a more effective office structure to better meet the requirements of refugees. However, the security of refugee camps under international protection was of vital importance; the civilian and humanitarian character of the camps must not be eroded due to the infiltration of undesired elements, especially terrorists.

18. Ms. LOPES da ROSA (Guinea-Bissau) reiterated her delegation's support for the High Commissioner's efforts and welcomed the new emphasis on increasing the efficiency and capacity of UNHCR to respond to critical situations.

19. There was no doubt that war was one of the principal causes of population displacement. It was regrettable that racial hatred, intolerance, ethnic persecution and unchecked political ambitions were continuing to cause conflicts leading to such mass movements. Her delegation recognized the scale and seriousness of such displacements and felt that they represented not simply a humanitarian problem, but comprised social and economic aspects whose solution depended primarily on the affected countries themselves, although assistance from the international community remained indispensable.

20. It was necessary to deal with the main causes of the movements of refugees and displaced persons with determination and political will. Stopping the mass exodus of people required the creation of a favourable socio-economic and political climate, respect for human rights and the establishment of institutions based on legality, justice and responsibility. For their part, countries of origin had to create conditions favourable to the voluntary repatriation of refugees and the return of displaced persons to their homes in conditions of security and dignity, which would constitute a durable solution to the problem.

21. Progress had been made in many countries, but the situation in Africa remained serious. More than 50 per cent of the world's refugees were to be found there, and the majority were women and children. The parties to the conflict in the Great Lakes region should respect human rights and the standards of international humanitarian law, and should begin immediately a process of constructive dialogue to resolve the crisis. The security of humanitarian aid workers should also be guaranteed.

22. The world's response to the persistence of population movements should be based on three elements: prevention, mitigation of the adverse effects of the presence of refugees on host countries, and the search for durable solutions. Mechanisms had to be established to guarantee continuity between emergency aid, rehabilitation and development. Guinea-Bissau was ready to make its modest contribution to the search for solutions to that problem.

23. Mr. OTUYELU (Nigeria) said that Nigeria, which had once been the origin of many refugees, and which was currently host to a sizable number of refugees, was very concerned about the increasing number of refugees and displaced persons, especially in Africa, where deteriorating economic conditions made the situation of refugees and displaced persons lamentable. Among other factors, internecine wars and civil conflicts had contributed to the situation. His delegation hoped that the parties to the conflicts would put the interest of their people above the struggle for power, and that they would tread the path of peaceful settlement of their disputes without resorting to armed combat.

24. The current crisis in the Great Lakes region of Africa was a cause for particular concern, not only because it worsened the already precarious refugee situation, but also because it imperiled the work of UNHCR in the area. Nigeria called on the parties to the conflict to work for a quick settlement, and urged them to exercise moderation, as effective solutions could be obtained only through dialogue and tolerance.

25. Elsewhere in Africa, on the other hand, there had been successes in the work of repatriating and reintegrating refugees, and there had been notable collaboration between UNHCR and UNICEF on unaccompanied minors. His delegation also welcomed the increased cooperation between UNHCR and other United Nations agencies, including the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), in extending services to refugees and displaced persons.

26. The ultimate goal of international protection and support for refugees and displaced persons, irrespective of the causes of their displacement, should be to ensure their voluntary return and reintegration into their countries of origin; the countries of origin and the host countries should enhance their collaboration with UNHCR to remove all impediments to a durable solution, above all in the Great Lakes region. Attention should also be focused on the situation of host countries. The influx of refugees and displaced persons put serious pressure on the infrastructure, economy and environment of those countries, and could create problems of social security, particularly in developing countries. There was a need for the international community to consider ways of assisting States receiving a great influx of refugees.

27. The refugee issue had assumed increasingly complex dimensions, which sometimes challenged UNHCR to work at maximum capacity. In that respect, his delegation welcomed the institutional reform involving the delegation of flexible power to the resident representatives to take action in emergencies. Regrettably, the financial resources of UNHCR had not been increased to meet its growing responsibilities. Adequate resources should be provided to UNHCR as a necessary support for its humanitarian work. His delegation supported and profoundly appreciated the humanitarian work of UNHCR in providing for the world's growing numbers of refugees, displaced persons and returnees.

28. Mr. SERIWA (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya) praised the efforts of host countries to provide assistance to refugees and displaced persons, and expressed the hope that UNHCR would continue to work with donor countries and governmental and non-governmental organizations to obtain the additional resources needed to assist host countries to bear the burden of caring for large numbers of people. Voluntary repatriation was the most appropriate durable solution to the refugee problem, and necessitated dealing with the major causes of massive population

displacements, i.e. foreign occupation, civil war and other threats to individual security, well-being, dignity and human rights.

29. With reference to paragraph 192 of the UNHCR report (A/51/12), he wished to clarify that the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya had expelled no Palestinians from its territory; rather, after hearing of the signing of the peace accords between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel and of the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and part of the West Bank, many of them had decided to return voluntarily. The tragedy had begun when the Israeli authorities had denied them the right to return to their homes and to recover their properties in Palestine, which was why they had been detained at the border between Egypt and the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya.

30. The Libyan Government had provided tents, medicines and food to that group of people, some of whom had agreed to return to the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya after prolonged and difficult negotiations. UNHCR should promote the return of those refugees to their homes and should participate in the efforts under way to eliminate the causes of their exodus, i.e. the Israeli occupation of, colonialism in and settlements on Palestinian territory. Efforts should also be made to carry out the resolutions adopted in various organs of the United Nations guaranteeing the Palestinians the right to self-determination and to return to their homes, because a comprehensive, just and lasting peace could be established in Palestine only if all Palestinians returned to their territory.

31. Ms. FRITSCHE (Liechtenstein) expressed her delegation's full support for the statement of the delegate of Ireland on behalf of the European Union, and said that the scale and nature of the problem of refugees and internally displaced persons required durable solutions covering all aspects of the problem, of which protection and prevention were two crucial aspects. She particularly commended the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for her personal dedication, professionalism and managerial capabilities and leadership of one of the most efficient United Nations agencies.

32. Liechtenstein attached particular importance to the situation of refugee women and children, and noted with satisfaction that it was among the priority issues identified in the UNHCR report (A/51/12). That question had also been adequately addressed in the Beijing Platform for Action, the recommendations of which had served as the basis for the pertinent activities of UNHCR. Her delegation particularly welcomed the memorandum of understanding concluded between UNHCR and UNICEF, and had noted the High Commissioner's remark that the issue of terrorism should not jeopardize the institution of asylum for persons in genuine need of protection. It fully supported that view and would continue to participate actively in the consultations on that issue.

33. It was obvious that the capacities of UNHCR were limited with regard to prevention. The efficiency of its activities depended largely on the political will of States, and for that reason intergovernmental bodies had to face the challenge of designing urgently-needed policies aimed at preventing massive refugee movements. Complex emergency situations had made it clear that peace-keeping and post-conflict peace-building could contribute significantly to durable solutions and to the prevention of massive refugee flows. The promotion and protection of human rights were also important elements in prevention, since violations of those rights continued to be one of the main reasons that forced

people to leave their homes. The international community should develop mechanisms to assist States in preventing conflicts between communities. Finally, the Government of Liechtenstein reaffirmed its commitment to continue its political and financial support for the activities of UNHCR, and looked forward to welcoming the High Commissioner for a visit in the near future.

34. Mr. SY (Organization of African Unity) said that in recent years UNHCR had met with new challenges and assumed more complex responsibilities in the discharge of its mandate. The need to strengthen the protection mission of UNHCR was especially important, and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) called on those countries that had not as yet ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1969 Protocol to do so in order to bring universal adherence to the required international protection of refugees. Similarly, member States of OAU which had not become parties to the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa were being encouraged to ratify that Convention.

35. OAU welcomed the fact that UNHCR had continued to consolidate its wide-ranging emergency preparedness and response arrangements, as those and other mechanisms would enhance the administrative capacity of UNHCR in the delivery of assistance in emergency situations. OAU welcomed the signing of the memorandum of understanding between UNHCR and UNICEF aimed at promoting effective coordination of responses. While laudable gains had been achieved by UNHCR in fulfilling its humanitarian mission of providing refugee protection and relief and facilitating repatriation, much more needed to be done to strengthen its capacity. The international community was duty bound to make available the necessary resources to enable UNHCR to serve. The work of UNHCR had been made more complex by various conflicts and political instability resulting in large population displacements.

36. Of particular concern was the burden borne by asylum countries, as well as the long-term effects of refugee flows on their environments and natural resources. In that regard, OAU commended the asylum countries for the tremendous sacrifices made in meeting the needs of refugees at high social and economic costs, and appealed to the international community to assist them. The new phenomenon of misunderstanding and tension between refugees, on the one hand, and local populations and authorities, on the other, was a clear manifestation of the impact the influx of refugees had on the countries of asylum. The problem of security within the refugee camps further exacerbated the situation and, if not contained, would result in the destruction of the African tradition of hospitality and solidarity. Therefore the obligation of refugees to conduct themselves in a manner consistent with their status could not be over-emphasized.

37. There was a critical and alarming refugee situation in the Great Lakes region, especially in eastern Zaire, which could erupt into a humanitarian catastrophe engulfing that entire African sub-region. In response to the crisis, several urgent initiatives were being taken at regional and international levels, including the meeting of the OAU Committee of Twenty held at the onset of the crisis, which had decided to send a fact-finding mission to the area. That had been followed by a special session of the Central Organ of the OAU Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution to further review the situation. The OAU Central Organ had issued a communiqué appealing

to all the parties for an immediate cessation of hostilities. THE OAU Secretary-General had since dispatched a high-level delegation to Zaire and Rwanda in an effort to halt the fighting in eastern Zaire. Moreover, a regional summit was scheduled to be held in Nairobi on 5 November 1996.

38. OAU welcomed the appointment of Mr. Raymond Chrétien as Special Envoy of the Secretary-General to Zaire, with the mandate to find the causes of the conflict, develop plans for defusing the tension and establish a ceasefire, thus paving the way for a process of negotiations. He was also to explore the possibilities of convening a regional conference on peace, security and development in the Great Lakes region, an idea which was supported by OAU. One of the greatest challenges in the Great Lakes region would be to evolve a lasting solution to voluntary repatriation. OAU had consistently maintained that voluntary repatriation could take place only when a clear distinction had been made between bona fide refugees and armed elements. It was necessary to build the confidence of the refugees and facilitate their safe return to their countries of origin.

39. The cooperation of the Governments of the asylum countries and the countries of origin in collaboration with UNHCR would be an encouraging step. OAU called on the Governments of the asylum countries to ensure the security of the refugees within the camps, while urging the Governments of the countries of origin to do everything possible to create an enabling political environment in which the returnees could live without fear of reprisal in their own country, in conformity with the Action Programme of the 1995 Bujumbura Conference.

40. There was also a need to consider expanding the role of UNHCR in close collaboration with other organizations and agencies for a closer link between the programmes of repatriation and those of resettlement and rehabilitation. The international community should provide the necessary resources, while the Security Council should assume its security responsibilities in order to enable UNHCR to more effectively fulfil its protection, relief and repatriation functions.

41. Mrs. KALAJDZISALIHOVIĆ (Bosnia and Herzegovina) said that, although for the past 10 months peace had been taking hold in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a durable and stable peace required full implementation of the Dayton/Paris Agreement. Regrettably, one of the most important annexes to the Agreement, annex 7, had yet to be implemented.

42. The vast majority of the 2 million refugees and displaced persons from and in Bosnia and Herzegovina had been forced to leave their homes as a result of "ethnic cleansing"; not to allow their free return would amount to de facto acceptance of "ethnic cleansing" and genocide. The parties were required to ensure that refugees and displaced persons were permitted to return in safety, without risk of harassment, intimidation, persecution or discrimination, particularly on account of their ethnic origin, religious belief or political opinion.

43. Some parties, however, especially the Serbian entity, had not only failed to meet those conditions but were even continuing to expel members of ethnic groups other than their own from the territories under their control. In the Zone of Separation, homes rebuilt during the day by potential returnees were

being systematically destroyed. Such incidents could clearly be interpreted as measures to discourage the return of refugees to the zone. In addition, various deliberate acts of intimidation had taken place in recent weeks; such acts must be condemned in the strongest terms throughout the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the interest of preserving the Peace Agreement, her country appealed to the international community, UNHCR, the International Police Task Force and the NATO Implementation Force to do their best to ensure that the parties complied with the obligations stipulated in the Agreement.

44. Her delegation expressed its gratitude to the Governments of the countries that had offered hospitality to refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although her Government stood ready to assume more responsibilities in the search for common solutions to problems of repatriation, it could do little without the assistance and cooperation of the international community. It was not just a matter of working for the return of refugees and displaced persons within the Federation, but of having people return to the entities from which they had come, preventing the ethnic manipulation of sensitive areas such as Brcko, Srebrenica and Zepa and ensuring the right of return for people from those places. Other problems also needed to be solved. For instance, refugees could not be asked to return to areas which were still under the direct control of the war criminals who had raped and expelled them. In that context, the European Union could play a positive role as a partner in efforts to repatriate as many refugees as possible to Bosnia and Herzegovina. That would have a significant psychological impact on the attitude of the refugees, for it would make their decision to return to their homes much easier.

45. The return of refugees and displaced persons was an integral and vital aspect of the Dayton Agreement, and the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina clearly depended on whether its people were able to return to their homes, rebuild their lives and hope for a better future. Only then would it be possible to proclaim the Dayton Agreement a success.

46. Mr. MATEŠIĆ (Croatia) said that, for all its fine work in alleviating the plight of refugees, UNHCR by itself could not solve the refugee problem. That problem was a complex, often political, issue which could be resolved only through a comprehensive approach requiring the determination and political will of the States concerned and of the international community. In that connection, the developing tragedy in eastern Zaire was not receiving the attention it deserved from the international community, even though numerous danger signs had foretold that catastrophe.

47. In order to avert a refugee crisis, there was a need to take preventive measures and alert regional or international mechanisms that could help to resolve conflicts which might lead to flows of refugee or displaced persons. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights could play an active role in that regard, since many refugee flows were caused by human rights violations.

48. While Croatia was grateful for the assistance provided by donor countries, charitable organizations and UNHCR, international assistance covered only 30 per cent of the needs of the refugees and displaced persons in its territory. Croatia was currently accommodating over 180,000 refugees, mostly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and caring for over 140,000 internally displaced

persons. Up to the end of 1995, his Government had had to provide $916 million in direct assistance to those individuals, while the indirect costs were estimated at $706 million.

49. In the past year, Croatia had successfully repatriated refugees and returned displaced persons to their homes. Approximately 20,000 Bosnian Muslims from western Bosnia had been able to return to their homes of origin; despite some difficulties, their repatriation had been a great success. Over 50,000 Croatian citizens displaced by the policy of "ethnic cleansing" had also been able to return to their homes after most of the occupied territories had been reintegrated into the Republic of Croatia through the legitimate actions of Croatian military and security forces.

50. On the other hand, over 80,000 ethnic Croat and other non-Serb displaced persons had not as yet been able to return to their homes in the Croatian Danubian region, currently under the governance of the United Nations Transitional Administration (UNTAES), largely because of resistance and obstruction from elements within the local Serbian population. However, his Government was confident that the displaced population would eventually be able to return home and that the recent normalization of relations between Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia would improve the overall situation of refugees and displaced persons in the region.

51. Regarding the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia was pleased that peace had been restored to that country and hoped that that would not only lead to stability in the region but also relieve Croatia of the burden of accommodating tens of thousands of Bosnian refugees.

52. When Croatia had liberated most of its occupied territories in the summer of 1995, some 120,000 ethnic Serbs had left those regions in an organized manner, in advance of the Croatian military and upon orders from their leaders. Croatia acknowledged its obligation to allow the return of those individuals who wished to do so and who had not committed war crimes. As of 1 August 1996, Croatian authorities had authorized the return 9,253 persons, out of some 16,000 applicants. It was also estimated that some 2,000 to 3,000 people had returned without seeking authorization.

53. For there to be a more complete return of ethnic Serbs to Croatia, a process of confidence-building must take place. However, such a process did not depend solely on the Croatian Government, but also on the goodwill of the Serbs who had left and on the Government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Of course, the return of all persons to their homes, regardless of ethnicity or legal status, would be greatly enhanced by the economic reconstruction of war-damaged regions. That could only be accomplished with the assistance of the international community. A combination of economic reconstruction and political solutions was the only approach that could ultimately solve the tragic problem of refugees and displaced persons in the region.

54. Mr. GUBAREVICH (Belarus) said that the many and diverse cases of involuntary population displacement could be solved only through cooperation among international organizations, especially UNHCR, regional bodies and neighbouring States. In the early 1990s, migratory movements had begun in the territory of the former Soviet Union and had affected Belarus, a country that

attracted migrants owing to its geographical situation, the permeability of its northern, southern and eastern borders, its relative economic and social stability and the absence of ethnic conflicts. The Government of Belarus was concerned at the current situation: 29,000 citizens of the former Soviet Union and 4,000 Asian and African refugees had requested refugee status; in addition, approximately 200,000 returnees and 100,000 illegal immigrants were seeking asylum in Belarus.

55. The Government of Belarus had adopted various measures to mitigate the effects of mass migration and solve the problems of refugees, returnees and displaced persons. The establishment of a system to regulate migratory movements, the attenuation of the adverse ecological effects of migration, the protection of the rights and interests of migrants and asylum-seekers and the creation of conditions for receiving, housing and integrating refugees were priority tasks. Moreover, legislation on migration was being improved with a view to determining the legal status of refugees, regulating the acquisition and loss of such status and establishing legal, economic and social guarantees to protect refugees in Belarus. Bilateral and multilateral agreements were being concluded with neighbouring countries in order to regulate migration. Belarus had signed agreements with CIS on assistance to refugees and involuntary emigrants and had taken other measures.

56. Migratory movements in Belarus were not an exclusively national problem: the provision of humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants required the coordination of the activities of all interested countries and relevant international organizations. It was necessary to continue to improve the system for exchanging information, harmonization of legislation in the field of migration and prevention of waves of migration. One example of cooperation between the CIS countries and neighbouring States, international and non-governmental organizations had been the Regional Conference to Address the Problems of Refugees, Displaced Persons, Other Forms of Involuntary Displacement and Returnees in the Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and Relevant Neighbouring States, which had been held in Geneva in May 1996. After two years of preparation by the international community and, in particular, UNHCR, the Conference had resulted in the elaboration of a global strategy to address problems relating to involuntary migrants and set guidelines for future cooperation between the CIS countries and international organizations. Aware of the importance of strengthening cooperation in that area, Belarus had been one of the initiators of the Conference and had participated in all stages of its preparation.

57. Belarus was prepared to implement the results of the Regional Conference and seek civilized solutions to the problem of migration in Eastern Europe. It was to be hoped that the international community's efforts to alleviate that problem in Eastern Europe would yield results. Finally, his delegation commended the work of UNHCR and its office in Minsk, which provided material assistance and offered advisory or legal services to national bodies that dealt with the question of refugees.

58. Mr. BEN AMOR (Tunisia) reiterated his delegation's support for United Nations activities to alleviate the suffering of refugees and welcomed the work of UNHCR and the ties that it had established with the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the United Nations Population Fund, WHO and UNDP. His

delegation also welcomed the memorandum of understanding between UNHCR and UNICEF to facilitate assistance to refugee or displaced women and children who, according to the Secretary-General's report (A/51/329), accounted for over half of the total number of refugees. His delegation supported the cooperation between UNHCR and non-governmental organizations in providing assistance to refugees.

59. With regard to the efforts to restructure UNHCR, his delegation supported the measures to increase its efficiency, while stressing that any lasting solution would have to be based on national, regional and international solidarity, which entailed the mobilization of considerable financial and human resources. The international community should respond appropriately to the funds requirements of UNHCR activities.

60. His delegation was concerned at the current situation in eastern Zaire. In that connection, he cited the numerous initiatives that had been undertaken by the President of Tunisia, Mr. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and his continuing efforts to promote peace in Africa. Tunisia called upon the parties concerned to halt the fighting and re-establish peace, and invited international and regional organizations to provide assistance to the victims in order to avert a tragedy that would affect the entire African continent. Tunisia, which in March 1996 had hosted a summit meeting to follow up the meeting that had been held by the Carter Foundation in Cairo to consider the situation in the Great Lakes region, considered it essential to adopt a global approach to the crisis that included political, humanitarian and development issues with a view to solving refugee problems. Such an approach should concentrate primarily on the prevention of humanitarian crises through not only economic development but also the promotion of respect for human rights, rule of law and responsible management of public affairs. Secondly, the international community should demonstrate its solidarity with the host countries, whose precarious social and economic situation was usually aggravated by the arrival of refugees. Finally, lasting solutions should be based on repatriation operations that combined political action to restore peace with economic reconstruction activities in devastated countries.

61. Mr. PEDERSEN (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) highlighted the comments made by the High Commissioner concerning the erosion of international protection standards, the need for real burden-sharing and the danger of politicizing humanitarian tasks. Addressing the needs of refugees, involuntarily displaced persons and returnees required cooperation between agencies and Governments, especially between Governments that might be willing to share increasing burdens. While the causes of population displacements were usually political and called for political solutions, political factors must be kept distinct from humanitarian activities. At the same time, the international community must adopt a broader approach which, in addition to humanitarian considerations, encompassed concern for justice, security and political and economic interests.

62. In the Great Lakes region, the rapid deterioration of the situation represented the most serious development since the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and called for the timely adoption of effective measures. The humanitarian assistance programmes that the International Federation had been carrying out since 1994 were clearly no longer sufficient. The Federation called upon the

international community to make every diplomatic effort to halt the current fighting and seek, as a matter of urgency, a political solution that could stabilize the situation and ensure the security and well-being of the affected individuals and peoples. In order to enable the International Federation and other humanitarian agencies to provide assistance, the Governments of the countries of the region and other countries should facilitate access to the areas concerned, support planned activities and commit themselves in the longer term to building on the achievements of the many individuals and organizations of the countries concerned, such as the Zaire Red Cross Society, whose many volunteers had continued to assist the refugees after others had been obliged to leave.

63. Most persons who had received assistance in the Great Lakes region were women and children, who must be protected in every way possible. The magnitude of the disaster in the Great Lakes region required concerted action from the humanitarian agencies involved, and the International Federation was ready to play its role in accordance with its mandate and its principles, cooperating with others with the full support of its 169 national societies, including those in the countries affected.

The meeting rose at 5 p.m.